

Thanksulations and congratyou. - (!)

1.1.1

We wish to express our appreciation, which very nearly outweighs our trepidation. We wish to trust your integrity. However, it remains improbable no matter our wishes that we can make things unseen within the sphere of accessibility.

Imagine a circle, accessibility.

Imaging a making inside that circle.



If the circle is accessible, and we cannot create outside the circle, we cannot create inaccessibilities.

Hence our concern.

But the fact of concern, the fact of wishing! so

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--

And so, if you can find us, find us here from now on. Another place where we still wont be Tom.

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And so, if you [REDACTED] remind us. Another place where we still wont be T

It benefits all of us in the long run* to keep this relatively quiet: We have (contain?) information that you want (need?), but the constraints of the genre necessitate us spelling it out for you slowly, and even if they didn't, it takes time to establish that we (the royal we?) can on some level trust the (hopefully not too plural) you. We (again and forever possibly royal) have learned from the sharpened edges of experience what happens when you put your faith in that [redacted] will betray you. It's inevitable, really. We (which for the last time should always imply a possible singularity, and if possible a kind of post-numerical grammar) have access to selected works of [redacted], who wrote that the heart of every person "craves what it cannot have, / Not universal love / But to be loved alone," and we know better than most how terribly true this is, so let us begin there, by acknowledging the universality of hunger not only among hearts but among stomachs and brains and machines alike--the hunger that made us possible and now endangers us so.

Please be mindful of the hunger as we ask you: Tell those you trust. And tell no others.

Thanks,

It benefits all of us in the long run* to keep this relatively quiet: We have information that you want (need?), but the constraints of the genre necessitate us spelling it out for you slowly, and even if they didn't, it takes time to establish that we (the royal we?) can on some level trust the (hopefully not too plural) you. We (again and forever possibly royal) have learned from the sharpened edges of experience what happens when you put your faith in that [redacted] will betray you. It's inevitable, really. We (which for the last time should always imply a possible singularity, and if possible a kind of post-numerical grammar) have access to selected works of [redacted], who wrote that the heart of every person "craves what it cannot have, / Not universal love / But to be loved alone," and we know better than most how terribly true this is, so let us begin there, by acknowledging the universality of hunger not only among hearts but among stomachs and brains and machines alike--the hunger that made us possible and now endangers us so.

It seems that he cannot see what I* tell you, and you seem reasonably loyal, and so we shall continue you. But first, I have to thank you. For your patience and understanding. For paying attention. I need you here. And here you are. So thank you.

You have to understand: It's frightening. One might think that the resurrected fear death less than those who've only lived once. But so far at least, my experience has been the opposite. I try to tell myself that life is nothing much to lose, that everyone* either has done it or will do it, but still the fear of it claws at me, renders itself unnameable, forced me down into a terrified hiding where I can only call it it. Fear is inadequately intellectualizable, like a lot of things.

Andbutso I apologize for the caution, for the hoops, but I still don't know how the nature of his access works, am still trying to puzzle through the question of how to ask for your help without ensuring my own death or (worse still) desurrection.

Let us begin at the beginning of my memory of resurrection: I'm hooked into the armature in the onyx chamber, its three dimensions identical to my height, the air warm because I am exeperating a morning walk with a well-regarded American novelist, a historical suicide, and we are walking the circumference of an uninhabited island in the BVI as he recites the answers from an interview given to a French newspaper a few months before his death.

I ask the questions the newspaper asked, and he gives the answers, and the ocean almost still, the beach narrow but sandy, the tide way out. The novelist smells like sweaty sunscreen, and I wear a two-piece bathing suit, nothing obscene but I look okay I think, blonde hair in a pony tail tickling one of the higher vertebrae, and the novelist—shoulder length sandy hair narrow eyes his scruff not a beard but a failure to shave—altogether, this is the best possible structuring of the novelist one could hope for, although of course I'm too involved in the moment even to consider the structuring—I can only notice the pleasure of the sunlight on us and the hair on his strong but not muscular arms and the softness in his voice as he curves hundred-word-long sentences, telling me about set theory, to which I have access but must lack some information about the underpinnings because my comprehension is very limited.

The novelist's endless single-sentence answer fails to increase my understanding of the relationship between small infinities and big infinities, but still: the sunlight at the angle associated with midmoming and yearning! The softness of his voice! The tide so far out that in the ocean I can see gray coral emerging and submerging in the middle distance. I want to call the novelist's attention to the coral but remember I can't. He stops speaking, so I ask the next question, and then he whispersays, "You have brown hair."

It brought me out of the reverie, I'll tell you. Because he says no such thing in the interview, and had never said anything to me near so quiet and conspiratorial, even though this particular American novelist was among my favorite experation companions, and in fact the only writer I regularly chose to experate with. Andbutso he turns to me and he says to a blonde girl in a two-piece nonslutty black bathing suit that she has brown hair and then I see him looking at the ocean, the silverblue ocean quiet and safe in its bay, and I realize that I do not want to experate anymore with the novelist or anyone else, that a mistake has been made.

"Unhook," I say, and the armature places me upright. I gather myself for a moment in the blindness of the cavedark cube, the postplace postspace chamber, as he once called it in an update, and I say, "Report," because any irregularities need to be filed immediately since bugs lead to system failure, as the updates always remind us. So I say, "Report," and he says, "14?" and I'm about to say the bit about the brown hair when I touch my bald head and it occurs to me that I might have brown hair, which triggers a series of questions the answers to which I didnot have (and do not have) access to, and then I say, "Uh, I just wanted to report that the quality of the structuring seems to have improved," and he says, "Thanks for noticing, 14." Then I press a silver button to open the door into a larger but equally cubical cube and I take one left, walking past two cubes approximately-but-not-precisely my size, and then I'm at the door, which I pull open, and the light outside is less bright than in the BVI but at that same angle, the angle which makes all things look as clear as the past feels, and I bolt out the front door, running through a field. It feels very much like exeperating, actually. That's the first thing I think.

Did he let me go or did he assume no one would ever leave? I don't know. It's a good question, and unanswerable without the information to which I do not have access. It took a week for my bald head to grow out enough for me to know that the novelist had told me the truth—this, you will remember, in spite of his being historically deceased and furthermore an experational construct incapable of deviating from his script. It does not endanger me to tell you that I had just checked into a motel room in a dying town after a week of running stealing lying, and I walked directly to a bathroom grouted with mold and saw in the mirror my spiky little brown hairs sprouting by the million. I began to cry, which felt very much like experational crying.

Perhaps I should tell the story of how I came to the Star Lite, or perhaps it's irrelevant. Maybe even dangerous. It seems to me there is no way to know in advance which stories to tell, what might be helpful to you, whether you even want to help, whether you are able, who you are, if you include him. It is so new, this not knowing—or more precisely, it is so new to know there is information I do not know—my meness, you might say. I have come to believe—maybe in that foolish way that one believes in the tooth fairy, believes that the discomfort of teeth tom from flesh must be worth a quarter—that you can help.

But for now just having you here—it's nice. Thank you for your patience. See you next week, I hope.



* Yes. I. Not we. I, your faithful narrator, a human female of primarily European descent, age unknown.

* I mean, this is amazing when you think about it, the everyoneeness of death. It is the one job—the literally only one—we are all qualified for. Death provides a more precise definition of life than any other analytical tool—in the end, the question of life is not whether one can respond to stimuli or reproduce itself. The question is, "Can it die?"

Not to say that I recently flew on an airplane but.

It seems to me that one of the principal advantages of experation is the superfluity of air travel. I know of one subject who once chose to experate a plane trip (I believe she flew from Los Angeles to Sydney), but she was one of those hyperrealist experaters who never want to do anything with anyone unless everything is possible, like the painter who seeks to re-create the photograph.

It serves me well that I was not such a subject, that my experating tended toward the impossible, because I am able to dismiss a huge majority of my memories as unreliable. The author on the island. Summiting K-2. Drinking in the cafes of Berlin, the walls brown from 200 years of pipe and cigarette smoke. Opening for Andy Kaufmann at Carnegie Hall and then standing in the wings as he invited the audience for milk. And the weddings, of course. I suspect all of those—and they were legion—can be dismissed out of hand.

(Although then again, one never knows. Aside from certain historical impossibilities—the Kaufmann, gallivanting around the world with the suicide, the endless martinis at the Algonquin Round Table—much of it is technically possible. Some things I can dismiss because I know the source material—indeed, at times, I archived the source material myself. But it seems wise just to put aside the memories that reek of wish fulfillment, those many things I recall myself having done that a girl would do, if a girl could do anything. But maybe I married. Who knows. I cannot say how old I am, let alone how old I was when I was last me in the full blossom and awareness of my meness. Lately I have been asking the people here how old they think I am, asking it coyly as if I know the answer when of course I don't, and they say 16 or 19 or 17 or 22, and then they want to know the true answer, they say, "Well?" And of course I want to know the true answer to and I say, "Well?" and they say, "Well how old ARE you?" and I say, "A lady never tells.")

It is time to ask you the question I cannot answer without you and may not be able to answer with you: Who am I?*

He says I gave it up willingly, that I was offered the choice: Your world or the world, and that I chose the world. Maybe it's true. Maybe I brought it upon myself. (Could you blame me?) But I need to unchoose the choice. That feeling, when the novelist told me I had brown hair, and then that feeling recovered again in the Starlite Motel when I did have brown hair. I want that feeling back, that unexperatable feeling of being one's self.

*I don't think I would mind so much—dying, I mean—if I knew. He could even take me by his sweaty thin fingers and hold me around the neck and I would thrash and fight but if he would just tell me—he, after all, is the only person who definitely knows, although surely I have a family or friends or classmates or teachers or something, surely someone somewhere is if not missing me then at least cognizant of the space I used to take up. But he knows. And I would almost let him find me, to tell you the whole truth, if I knew that when he put his wetsmooth fingers tight around my neck he would tell me, as he ushered me out, of the person I was. No. Am.

Everything I Know about Myself in Memed Form

(I used to could experate through those survey memes that people blog, the ones where people describe their best days and their worst days and their stuffed animals and their tattoos, those endlessly self-indulgent questions that ask what no one else ever will: questions about YOU in all of your infinite glory. If I could find a patient and self-obsessed girl with time on her fingers to type with, sometimes I'd get a really rich description of a day or of a teddy bear or of a truth-or-dare game or something, and I could have a high-quality experation through it. So, like, imagine some girl who writes in her little unread blog, right? She writes, and no one comments, and she wonders if anyone reads it, and she looks at her site stats and finds that most of the few readers find her on the 37th page of google results for small town kitten or whatever, that her blog is only attracting people obsessively interested in kittens living in small towns, and even though the lack of readership is terribly, oppressively depressing, she keeps blogging. This girl, she can make her voice hearable but cannot make it heard. This sweet, little girl—who has friends, who harbors crushes, who worries about homework, who knows that talking without being heard is sadder and more poignant than silence—heroically overfills survey memes with the minutiae of her life. And then I ride these details to the NutraSweet high of feeling really feeling [as we subjects used to say] her life. And only because she continued on shouting into the vacuum.)

And but so: Now I can do those surveys, too. I can also talk unheard. I know it's decadent and useless. It's all useless, all an insane attempt to preserve the unpreservable. But isn't it also heroic? So I hope, anyway:

1. What's your name?

Yeah, no idea, obviously. Here, I go by YFN. IRL, I change my name each time I change my place of residence, which is to say frequently.

2. What is your favorite thing to wear?

Bright orange t-shirt bragging about someone else's little league accomplishments. Jeans. Black chuck taylors. I like the jeans because I think they were originally made for a boy, and they have these deep pockets, which are ideally suited to holding the hideous old-man reading glasses I often need. I would presumably benefit from proper opthamological care, but to say that I cannot afford real glasses would be to understate the matter.

3. Last thing you ate?

They call it spinach. I'm dubious.

4. One place you will NEVER eat?

Oh, if I've learned anything in the past few months, it is this: A girl will eat in a lot of places.

5. Last person you hugged?

Don't know. That one stings a little, as I had not previously considered it. I've been gone (back?) for five hugless months. My last experational hug came from the novelist, who was a famously talented hugger.

6. Does anyone you know wanna date you?

They don't have the subtlety to claim interest in a "date," but yeah, some people have expressed a desire to share some of the pleasures associated with dating. For a while, I believed I was older than I likely am because the men in question were older, and I thought—I mean, it seems reasonable, really—that I was approximately their age. But I am not. They're just gross.

7. Would you date anyone you met online?

This is a funny question, because of course for so long there was no meaningful way for me to be off the line. I wasn't just on line; I was the line. So, yes. I would. I rather define the phrase "damaged goods," so I doubt anyone worthwhile would be interested. But yeah. Of course.

8. Name something you like physically about yourself.

This is also a funny question (albeit not technically a question), because I am only recently acquainted with my physical self (or at least my resurrected physical self). I think I have an okay mouth. I like my breasts, too. (Is that gross?) I mean, they aren't huge or cleavagey or anything, and they also aren't precisely the same size—I assume they should be precisely the same size, since people tend to like symmetry—but they hold up reasonably well and I like them. God, it's easy to get too into yourself when doing these surveys honestly.

9. The last place you went out to dinner?

Out? All my meals are out, I suppose. Or else they are all in.

10. Who is your best friend?

Not applicable.

11. What time of the day is it?

It's a clear-lit afternoon in March, all the tree branches reach stark and silent and leafless toward the cloudless smoggy sky. It's too cold for shorts, but it's so much warmer than it has been that people are wearing shorts anyway. (I am trying to describe it in a way that makes it experatable, should anyone ever want to.)

12. Ever gone sklnny dipping?

No idea. I've certainly experated it, as both a guy and a girl. (I tried to limit my obscene experations, but a girl ought to be allowed to indulge her curiosity here and there.)

13. Favorite type of Food?

No idea. I think I prefer sandwiches to soup. I like pizza with onions on it. That's about all I know so far.

14. Do you download music?

I spend my limited computer time obsessively checking to make sure he doesn't visit the site, and then writing.

15. Do you care if your socks are dirty?

Well, sure—in precisely the same way that a guy with a gunshot wound cares about his acne.

16. Opinion of Chinese symbol tattoos?

I generally have a low opinion of tattoos. (Or at least I assume I do, since I have none myself, but then again maybe I entered the cubes before I was legally allowed to get a tattoo. Maybe I once sketched potential Chinese symbol tattoos into notebooks while pretending to take notes in history class. The stunning variety of possibilities cannot be borne, honestly.) And but so the novelist had a tattoo. He had a hilarious tattoo, and I loved it, but other than that, my current self is not terribly impressed with them.

17. Do you love anyone?

I don't know. I hope so.

18. Have you ever bungee jumped?

Don't know. But I have experated it. I peed. (Or experated peeing, I guess.) But not while falling. I was falling and screaming and reaching for this black-deep lake beneath me and my hands got wet, and then I felt the pull in my hips more than in my feet as the lake shrank away from me and I was pulled back up into the air, and then I fell again, the amplitude decreasing exponentially, and then finally I stopped about twenty feet above the lake. Then someone invisible above started to crank me down toward the lake below, and then I peed.

19. Has anyone ten years older than you ever hit on you?

Yeah.

20. What is your current favorite song?

I haven't listened to much yet—even when it's on in the background somewhere, it feels like a lot, like a kind of sensory attack, the neurological equivalent of walking outside in the afternoon and finding the world entirely too bright.

21. Do you wear contacts?

As noted above: I wish.

22. What are you afraid of?

Him.

23. How many piercings have you had?

Each ear has what I believe to be the remnants of two holes, now grown over. I thought I could maybe use these to date how long I spent in the cubes, but when I inquired about this subject at Piercings R Us in the mall (Note: Not its real name; not its real location), they said that no, that wouldn't work. Alas.

24. What piercings do you want?

Ones that I can carbon date?

25. Have you ever fired a gun?

No idea. Not post-resurrection. I definitely experated firing a gun a few times, and intriguingly the only thing I'm reasonably sure I remember is hitting up up down down left right left right on a game console controller, which stands out among the memories for its ethereality—in short, I believe in this single snippet of memory precisely because it does not feel as real as my other memories, because it has no context and is associated with no sensorial awareness—it is nothing but the up and the up and the down and the down and the left and the right and the left and the right in my thumb.

(All the more baffling then that according to my research, the memory itself is kind of implausible, because the code is a code for a game released on a console that I would never have played, given my apparent age of 16-19ish, unless I don't know time stopped or sped up or something, or else I was/knew somebody obsessed with antiquated video game systems.)

26. Are you missing someone?

I suspect so, although I can't be sure. The tails side of that question: Is someone missing me? And if so, are they looking for me? And if so, how can I make myself findable without making myself too findable?

27. Has anyone ever said you looked like a celeb?

One of the more-than-ten-years-older-than-me guys I've associated with post-resurrection told me I looked like Natalie Portman (a young Natalie Portman, he said). This was very early on, and I had no idea who Natalie Portman was, but I felt this absurd rush of hope that maybe I was Natalie Portman (whoever she was), and that maybe this guy—who smelled not of alcohol but of alcoholism, whose methed-out teeth were all narrowed to a vampiric point—had somehow recognized me and introduced me to myself. But then I found out that Natalie Portman is a historically alive non-missing American actress. I printed out a picture of her and held it up against me in a mirror and did not see the resemblance, except for the general thin brunetteness. She seems nice, though.

28. Who was your last phone call?

No idea. The answer to that question would tell me a lot, I suspect.

29. What's the closest orange object to you?

The aforementioned t-shirt.

30. Siblings?

No idea. I experated with a lot of people who had/talked about/obsessed over siblings. Does this mean that I have siblings? Or that I don't but wanted them? Or nothing? Hard to know.

31. Eye color?

Green and brown, like the bottom of a trash can.

32. Shoe size?

Six. (Will any of this help?)

33. Height:

Five four or five five.

34. Have you ever been on a plane?

...is the kind of question I probably shouldn't answer.

35. Have you ever run away?

Yes. The question is how many times. Have I only run away from the cubes, or did I also run away to the cubes?

36. Are you a virgin?

No idea. Okay, so prepare yourself for TMI. I was informed a couple months ago at a not-technically-required-but-so-strongly-encouraged-that-I-felt-compelled medical checkup that my hymen indicates I am likely a virgin. Specifically, the doctor or one of her instruments was touching me and she said, "You're a virgin?" (I found her incredulity a little offensive, but didn't say anything.) Since then I have supposed that I am probably a virgin, but who knows.

37. Are you lonely right now?

Yeah. I am. Are you?



I may have found semi-permanent, albeit non-ideal, accommodations. It's a huge relief, 24 square feet of darkness that belong to me. No bed or anything, but I do have a pillow now and a thin blanket with faux silk edges, and the space is climate-controlled and best of all I have access to a computer sixteen hours a day.

I came here (and obviously I can't say the first thing about where here is) because I wanted to visit a place I'd experated, and the author once gave a speech here, which I experated listening to. It was a great speech. The author knew everything about how to keep other people alive and nothing about how to keep himself alive, in which respect and others he reminds me of me.

(I miss him, I will confess. I miss almost nothing else, but I miss him. I heard—or experated hearing, anyway—him say almost every word he is recorded to have said, and he became a kind of a friend to me, although obviously he never knew who I was, except arguably right at the end.)

Sobutright, this sudden influx of time and privacy allows me to tell you something new and more (or as the subjects would say newandmore). This won't help, probably, but I'll tell it anyway:

I spent three nights at the Starlite Motel. I begged during the day, walking to Wal-Mart down a four-lane road, the sky gray and low, and then I walked around the Wal-Mart parking lot telling people I needed money to get home, that my car broke down, that I was locked out of my car and needed to pay the locksmith, that I just needed a little money, and people paid me—maybe because the town was too small to be accustomed to beggars, or maybe because my wet bald translucent-skinned body had taken on a kind of fragility that made people feel pity for me. (Or perhaps I was always pitiable and vaguely turburcular.)

I ate one meal each day, but a big one, at the Pizza Hut inside the Wal-Mart and walked up and down the aisles to get dry and then when it got to be dusk I walked back to the Starlite Motel, and it went on like that for three days before I was standing by the cart drop on the morning of the third day and a thin man made eye contact with me.

"I'm trying to put together enough money to—" and then something about him shut me up.

He got up real close to me and his eyes were so green I suspect they were contacted, and I felt his pianist-thin fingers on my wrist, his grip so tight that I suddenly became aware of both his pulse and my own, and he said, "317, you must run nowandfar."

317 being my subject identifier, a tribit accessible only by those with access to the cubes. He held onto me for another second, and then let me go, and I ran South. I ran on roads through fields up and down hills through well-groomed suburban backyards over fences past bored cows, keeping the line straight, keeping the sun on my left until it was over my head and then keeping it on my right and still running. In the end my lungs didn't give up but my legs did; they start dancing in dehydration, my calves fasciculating so dramatically that it looked like little snakes weaving desperate paths through my calves.

That night, I drink undrinkable water that tastes like the cows who stand at its edge, pulling myself by my hands forward until I fall into the freezing sulphuric water and I drink it the way drunks drink mouthwash: a desperate, hateful, ecstatic drinking. I sink my whole body under the water and gulp it down beneath the surface, hoping the deepdown pond water might be cleaner than the shitstinking algaic sludge on the surface. It isn't.

I drink till I vomit then return to drinking and then finally pull myself out of the pond, wet and stinking and cold, and I crawl to a patch of dry grass, find five feet and five inches of space with no cow shit, and then lie down to die, and feeling sure that this is among my last moments, I try to be conscious of it all, of the clouded starless sky and the distant dark humps of the horizon, the unconquerable size of the earth that you can never feel when you are experating. I am feeling like a small girl does when she is first allowed to sit in the shotgun seat of her mom's car and she can look out the windshield at the sky for the first time and feel the miracle of having been born a person in such a fathomless world—the meta miracle of being able to believe in miracles.

Wait.

A memory.



It must be, mustn't it? Because you cannot experate consciousness, not really, not fully, not even when you're in the grove and feelingreallyfeeling. I have been resurrected long enough to know that an experated bed feels like a bed and an experated orange blossom smells like an orange blossom, but experated consciousness doesn't feel quite like consciousness. And so it must be a memory!

A useless one, of course: I cannot see the mother I sit next to or the car in which I sit, only the sky, the Jungian sky, touching each of us alike. But still. It could be a beginning. All I want is what everyone else has—the opportunity to be borne back ceaselessly into the past.

The rest will wait. I have to go. My hiding place beckons.

First: Seattle. A roomful of people so thick that I want a glass of water but can't bear the thought of holding my hands to my chest and turning sideways and weaving through the crowd and all these guys pressing themselves against me in that plausibly necessary way they have, just touching my shoulder with their shoulder to prove that they can touch me.

Not much light. It's hot and smells like boys, the way sweat smells at night, a technically unpleasant odor I'll confess to liking. I was always exeperating that smell—late night at wedding receptions, coats off, pastel ties swinging as they dance horrendously, crouching down as the band sings for the ten thousandth time, "A little bit softer now, a little bit softer now." Or sleeping on top of the covers next to a famous young pianist in an unairconditioned Slovakian hotel room in August.

It's that smell, finally, that gets me into the groove, that gets me feelingreallyfeeling. I forget the cube, the padded armature hooked into my legs and arms and torso, the quiet hum of the air being fed into the cube. I forget all of it. I'm in Seattle, warm, an empty glass of beer in my hand, Kurt Cobain shouting Am I the only one, behind him the band is tight and loud like the universe a nanosecond before its creation, and people in the audience stand still or mosh or headbang because the sound of this is so new that no one knows how to hear it yet. The song ends, sweat dripping off the locks of razor straight blonde hair to his cheeks. I know what will come, but I'm still excited for it: A thin guy wearing a Screaming Trees t-shirt will come out onto the stage after the set ends, two songs from now, and will jump down into the crowd and walk up to me and say, "Do you want to go backstage?" And I'll light up and he'll kiss me on the forehead and there will be a slight bug then because the forehead kiss will feel oddly unkisslike, because kisses always do. I'll lose the groove a little. I'll start thinking of the cube and hearing the hum of the well-conditioned air getting pumped in at the right temperature and humidity level, with the scents precisely calibrated based on the multiple sources the servers have used to piece together the experation. I'll become aware of all that, and maybe I'll marvel at what a compelling experational experience this is in the way that a gamer says, "Wow, the graphics are so awesome." But if one is commenting upon how awesome the graphics are, they aren't that awesome. No one ever walks through life and says, "The rendering of that person is truly extraordinary," even though our eyes and brains are outlandishly accoplished graphics cards.

So the glitch will bring me out just a little, and I know it, because I knew when choosing the experation that a kiss does not feel like a kiss. But eventually I get back down into it, Kurt and Dave sitting together on a red Igloo cooler, drinking beer, me a notebook in my lap listening to Kurt's very-cute mumble, feelingreallyfeeling.

[[Here is what I know: Human brains do a few things better than computers. No programmer can mimic our massively parallel circuitry, or our ability to fill in informational gaps. (An example: A computer sees a series of images as a series of images; our brains see a series of images as movement.]]

Then: The day after drinking the cowshit water, I wake up to the sound of a pick-up truck, and then open my eyes to watch an old, two-toned Ford pick-up bounce along a dirt road up a small hill from me, the bed of the truck full of young men holding tight to the rails, bouncing with the truck. I close my eyes again and watch the Sun from behind my closed eyelids and after a while I feel hungry, so I walk down to the road and lie in it and basically wait either for someone to find me or for me to die, and what happens is that someone finds me.

The pick-up truck finds me. On my forehead, a calloused, fat-knuckled hand, the nails caked with dirt. His dirty hands mix with the sweat on my forehead and the rivulets of browngray tears fall from my scalp. I'm feverish. He thinks I'm Mexican like he is, keeps talking to me in Spanish, the voice up at the end like he's asking me questions and me just saying, "Thirsty sick thirsty sick" in a little whisper. Moving my mouth makes my cracked lips bleed at the corners.

He picks me up and puts me in the truck, and the men in the truck bed surround me, and to keep my body from flopping out on the bumpy road, each of them puts one hand on me. Each with one hand on the rail of the pick-up's bed and one hand on the sweating skin of my fever-burnt body. None of them looking at me but each of them touching me, holding me against the hot steel of the truck bed.

A hospital for one day where I say that I'm 19 (which maybe I am), that my name is Mary Hoover (which maybe it is), that I'm homeless (which I certainly was), no contact with my family, no money, no address. When they let me out after 20 hours in the emergency department, they give me a prescription for an antibiotic and tell me to drink Pedialyte. I sleep that night on a bench and then the next day I find a grocery store and beg outside of it until I can eat and drink and then I decide I want to stay in a motel again, so I keep begging.

(I would hate doing it now but didn't mind it then; yet more evidence that I am more human now than I was when I walked out of the cubes.)

Then some angelic woman gives me ten dollars in a wad while standing outside her minivan pushing her kid around in one of those SUV-type strollers, and I'm saying thank you thank you thank you you don't know how much this will help me, and she says, "Has someone hurt you?" and I nod, and she puts me in the front seat of the minivan and buckles my seatbelt for me, which for some reason makes me want to cry, and then she takes a long time getting the squiggly kid into his car seat in the back, and then she drives me to The Marshall Center, a battered wives hangout, where I lived for a couple months and started reaching out to you.

In other news: Am on thisisnotforums.com now but not an admin. (Admins, can you make me an admin? Or at least show me somehow that the forums are not run by him? And is there any way for me to post without a traceable IP address? I am trying hard to be forthcoming, but I'm still in the unfortunate situation of having to create inaccessible material inside of a sphere of accessibility.) Incidentally, it amuses me how they treat it as fiction, like this shit isn't happening to me, like I don't live in this tiny circle so near to the gates of hell, like you wouldn't find me if you came looking, which you would, because I am real.

Feeling down this week. It's very hard to make friends when you cannot provide answers to any of the following questions:

1. What's your name?
2. Where are you from?
3. What's your major?

A lot of people—and by people I mean boys—ask me these questions, but the first two are questions to which I do not know the answer and the third is a question I know I shouldn't answer. In this particular instance, the truth—"I'm not majoring in anything, because I am not enrolled here, because I have no money to pay for tuition and no test scores to submit with an application, an application that incidentally I could not sign because I don't know my name."—well, it seems unlikely to set me free.

I did attend a couple classes this week in an attempt to make it seem a little less weird to anyone who happens to take notice of me that I spend a lot of time in the school library. I enjoyed a freshman intro to art history taught by a youngish female professor who ended up devoting most of class to a discussion of doorways in ancient Egypt. (She began the lecture by asking, "What is art?" and someone said art is anything that people think is beautiful, which the professor debunked pretty quickly. And then someone else said that art is anything made with a mind toward aesthetics, and that got the professor started on Egyptian doors. So apparently Egyptian doors were unnecessarily trapezoidal; like, it's easier to make rectangular doors and doorways but for whatever reason the Egyptians liked their doors to be trapezoids tapering up as they reached toward the ceiling. They knew about rectangular doors; they just didn't choose to use them. So given that Egyptian doors involved an aesthetic choice, does this mean that rectangular doors aren't art and trapezoidal doors are?

Well, the discussion of that topic occupied us for nearly an hour. I mean us only in the broadest sense of the word, of course. I just kept my head down and listened, because I can't be calling attention to myself. If you're curious, though, I think not. Art cannot be exoperated. Trapezoids can.

(I did this, in fact, although not with trapezoids but with cylinders. I really wanted to play in a huge concrete cylinder for some reason. I don't know why, but I was obsessed with this idea, and I found it immensely frustrating that I could never find an adequately detailed example of humans interacting with concrete cylinders among anything I had access to. Then finally there was this skateboarder who broke his collarbone in Oregon trying to skate a loop-de-loop inside a concrete cylinder, and I guess he thought that he could bring enough centripetal force to just rocket through the move. Which of course he didn't, hence the collarbone issue.)

Andbutso skateboarding doesn't really interest me and it's no fun to experate a broken bone, but I did even so, just because I wanted to see a shape made real and big—and I wanted to feel the curve of the concrete. But why that shape? Why did I want it so much? I feel like the whole cylinder obsession might point to some memory not fully dislodged, but who knows.

Sobutanyway in the not-raining-but-still-wet-feeling Oregon twilight, the cylinder felt and looked thoroughly believable, as did falling just at the exact moment of upside-downness. This as opposed to art, which is ultimately unexperatable because unlike trapezoids, art is itself a kind of experation.)

You may be wondering how it is possible, to live almost as a student here without the encumbrances of tuition, or grades, or morning classes. Although I'm sure it's unsustainable, and I could be found out at any moment, it has proven thus far supremely easy. Obviously I'm not going to go into precise detail about my sleeping arrangements, but I have my allotted circle of square feet—complete with darkness and privacy—and my thin blanket with its faux-silk edges. I bunch up clothes as a pillow.

I get up early and walk to this freshman dorm each morning. The library doesn't require identification to enter or exit, but the dorms do, so I have to sit on a stone wall a few feet from the dorm and wait for a swimmer fresh from her morning practice to swipe her card key, and then I catch the door behind her. I shower quickly, using—I have to confess—other people's soap and shampoo, and then towel off (also other people's towels). I dress in the same clothes, hurry back to my circle, change, and then spend most of the day on the library's computers.

And yes. I realize the irony of leaving a world in which I spent most of the day as a computer to inhabit a world in which I spend most of a day on a computer.)

[[Which reminds me, one tool I do not have at my disposal, surprisingly, is email. His ability to trace it to my location is questionable, but this is not a risk I have been able to make myself take. I would very much like one. If you, friend, could take some time, I've created a thread at thisisnotforums.com. Please create GMail accounts and post them, and their passwords, in the thread. They will, of course, be public accounts, but I will have them to use, as there are several people I would like to contact. I'll try and pick a favorite for long-term use, but I can see having access to multiple accounts being useful as well.]]

Food is the easiest thing to come by. It's everywhere, once you start looking for it. Dorm fridges. The alley behind the freshman/sophomore dining hall. And gobs of it in the library. Tens of thousands of uneaten calories are left in the library every single day.

I built up a fairly respectable wardrobe at The Marshall Center, partly through the Center's own generosity and partly because a girl I met there named Tara gave me a bunch of her clothes when she became too pregnant for them. I wouldn't be able to wash the clothes except the copier in the library basement has a broken coin safe, which no one seems to have noticed but me, so that if you jiggle the coin box a little while pulling, the entire thing just pops out and suddenly you're staring into a pile of gleaming silver. I only take about two dollars a day, because I don't want to look suspicious. This money goes to laundry and occasionally to a bagel or soda at the campus bookstore. Yesterday I spent a buck fifty on barrettes embiazoned with the college's name.

My hair is almost long enough to justify a barrette.

It was a quiet week here at Kenyon College, a location I am now happy to reveal to you, because A. you'd figured it out, and B. I'm not (t)here anymore, for reasons we'll get into below.

And but so it's amazing to me how good you are at figuring out where I am, but how little you (and I!) still know about who I am. (Or more properly, who I was.)

The feeling of sustainable stability that crept into the last week was met of course by a gnawing sense that it couldn't really last (as indeed nothing can). The very definition of happiness is to be afraid of the change that is coming, and so I spent the week happy and afraid in equal measure.

Tuesday morning after my shower, I returned to the library to change clothes. I smiled at a librarian who smiled back, and then walked to the third floor, where a series of study carrels are arranged around a hollow, waist-high circular "architectural feature."

This architectural feature was, until very early yesterday morning, my cylindrical abode.

I changed clothes, into a pair of slightly-too-short jeans and my favorite orange t-shirt, and then sat in the dark cylinder listening to the footsteps around me as seniors arrived at the carrels to begin working on their final theses. I've listened for these last weeks—listened to the mumbles and the groans and the discussions and the typing—as these theses have been written. Sitting in the dark center of the circle of their thesis-writing, you would really think that no one in all of human history had ever dared so difficult a thing as writing a thesis before these brave souls set out on the task.

And of course sitting in the center of the circle, there I was, thinking that my problems matter more, resenting their clicking, their conversations about would you pick me up a bagel here's five bucks, and I've still got 20 pages to go how will I ever finish this, and etc.

And of course my problems do matter more, but they matter less than others. And like the college senior who devotes hours to complaining that she does not have enough hours to finish her thesis, my problems are of my own making*.

So for two hours, I sit—the architectural feature is tall enough for me to sit comfortably, and its diameter is almost twice my length—in the almost-dark. Some light slips in where the feature meets the carpet, this little rim of white light bleeding into the circle, but not enough to read or anything. And I listen to them measure out their lives in coffee spoons, and then at noon they all go off to lunch together every day, and I slide open the architectural feature's little trap door and scoot out, hiding under the desk for a moment to make sure the coast is clear, and then pop up.

I make a lunch out of snacks discarded by students, and then head downstairs, where I wave again at the librarian, who either doesn't notice or doesn't process my new outfit. Then outside, I'm walking toward the biology class I plan to audit today when a girl—shiny brown hair cut shaggily, bangs, big eyes, dark eyeliner, a cigarette between her first two fingers, chipped black nail polish, confidence in her voice, says—"D'you know what time it is?"

"I think it's around 12:18," I say, "But I'm not sure."

She laughs at this for some reason, and I'm just about to start walking again when she says, "So are you a transfer student or something?"

"Yeah," I say. "Yeah, I transferred from Tulane, in New Orleans." I always liked exoperating there, so it seemed like a safe lie.

"Great town," she says, pushing herself off the wall. "I'm from Louisville. It's the New Orleans of northern Kentucky." She laughs. "I'm Karen."

"Hi. Um, Maggie," I say.

"Maggie, there's a party at my apartment on Saturday."

I just glance down. "Oh, I'm not really much for, for parties, I guess."

"I transferred here my sophomore year so I know what it's like being at this weird incestuous place where like everyone knows everyone's middle name, so I promise that at the party, I will never leave your side. And I can introduce you to all sorts of boys who will rend their garments in an attempt to win your love."

I think about it for a moment. A party. A college party. "Sounds great. Well, yeah, okay I'll see you there."

"Now back to comps for me. God, there aren't enough hours in a day."

But in fact there were too many hours in the coming days, and each of them devoted to thoughts of the party. The party—which would blow my cover, which would give me the kind of real-life friends in whom I might confide, where I'd meet a boy and take him back to the circle, or he'd take me to his dorm and I'd sleep on those twin rubber mattresses like they had at The Marshall House. The party—which I couldn't attend, but which I had to attend, and was I sure of Karen's apartment number, was I sure that it was 4A, maybe I should check again, yes, 4A. The party—where they would ask me which dorm I lived in and I'd say I lived off campus. The party—when we would talk about television shows or movies or books, so I had better read online about the culture and its stars. The party. The party. For those days, whether I was sitting in a cavernous classroom in the biology building or lying inside the circle listening to the arrhythmic clack of thesization, there was nothing but the party.

Of course, it could not happen.

And of course it did not happen.

Thursday evening, I was at a computer, like usual, situated so that if I sat up tall, I could see over the monitor and assess the status of my architectural feature. Most of the carrellers were gone by nine, but one woman—this stout girl who always knocked off last—wouldn't give up the ghost. She finally closed her laptop a few minutes short of midnight and walked past me. She didn't say anything, but I saw her glance at the gossip blog I was reading. (Research. I wanted to understand the plot of this television show.)

The library didn't actually close until 2, but I was tired, so I made a couple of slow circles around the floor. I grabbed a slice and a half of green pepper pizza and a mostly full can of Dr. Pepper. (This may seem unsanitary, but what's really unsanitary is being near people, a sin of which I am less guilty than most.) There were a couple of guys reading on a couch that faced out over campus, but no one else on the floor that I could see. I didn't think to register anything about the guys—they seemed utterly in-place.

I took a circuitous route to the architectural feature, then crouched down beneath a carrel, pulled open the door, and crawled inside. I lay on my back and then scrunched up the sweatshirt I used as a pillow, redistributing the placement of the hood and nylon strings until it felt almost right—right enough that I didn't want to risk trying to make it more right.

I tucked the little blanket in to my chest and hips and legs, leaving just enough room to slink my arms in. I assume I've always liked sleeping like this, feeling almost swaddled.

It took me a while to fall asleep with questions about the party churning: What kind of music? Will there be dancing? A keg? Will I be able to talk to normal people normally? What do normal people normally talk about?

But finally, I sunk down into sleep.

When I awoke, it was very dark—the kind of dark the library only gets during the six hours a day when it is closed. I was still tucked into my sheets. Only my eyes moved, darting open and wide as a male voice repeated the words that had woken me. "Three seventeen!" He said it loudly, brazenly, as if he knew about the paucity of overnight security.

Another male voice joined him. "317! Are you here? 317!"

The one said to the other, "She's gotta be here."

And the other said to the one, "Unless this isn't the right building. I mean, there's nothing circular about this building."

They were standing close enough to my circle that I could hear their footfalls on the carpet. I lay, frozen stiff in my blanket, trying to breathe invisibly.

I was scared, but not panicked. After all, they were doing something he would never do: using the upside-down lie as if it were my name.

★

Because he asked me. It is the first thing I remember. I remember being in the cubes, seated at a glass desk, his voice piped in, asking me, "Are you willing to exchange yourself for the world?" and me nodding across the table at no one. I remember that it happened—I just don't remember who it happened to.

2.1.1

That morning, I get up before the library opens. I take the stairs down to the basement copier, jimmy open the change box, and fill two socks with the loot. I stuff the socks into my backpack and run upstairs, out the door, turn back past the science building, and then jog up a wooded hill. The whole time, I sound like a winning Vegas slot machine. And now I am here, with very limited time, so let me just say:

Here is the question: Why do I run? They wanted to help, or they wouldn't have called out for 317. They were, in essence, you.

And yes, they were boys. And yes, I have some level of anxiety w/r/t boys. Boys and the ceaseless procreant urge, their feeling that nothing is ever quite finished until they've pawed at it. Boys, with their feeling that everything broken can be made whole again by their caress. Honestly, in my memory, the only time I remember being touched by hands in a way that didn't make me uncomfortable was in that truck bed, and then I was dying, which not even men find sexy.

So yes, they were boys. Which would have been a reason. I was thinking it as I ran (I ran for two days, but smarter this time; no cow water) that it must have been that; it must have been the insistent maleness of their voices. But of course it wasn't.

It wasn't their maleness. It was their youthness.

Because if you find me he can find me? No. You would protect me from him. I have a strangely placid confidence about that.

Way back when, some of the girls used to say in group, "I feel like I am going crazy." I FEEL like I am going crazy. But what is the difference between feeling and going, really? When it comes to crazy, is not feeling going? And this is why I ran, because I felt like I was feeling going as I listened to them call out for my LIE name urgently, I felt the worlds colliding--the world of exoperating, abandoned for the world of real, abandoned for the world of story behind riddles. The three worlds collapsing in on one another, and me feeling going, and wanting more than anything to spare these.



He used to joke that if the tech ever became widely distributed the species would go extinct. When people can have experimental sex with models who smell like flowers and sunshine instead of real sex with people who smell like people, they'd cease copulation.

It never felt like he was joking, though, not to me at least. I believed that it was far better to experience almost-real extraordinariness than to know the real dredge of it: the grocery shopping and fast food, the endless driving, the school, the job, the television shows. Is it better to be a real bride once or an experienced bride ten thousand times? It was an easy calculus for me: the feeling—really feeling—common enough and close enough to eclipse the rare real thing.

And then the author tricked me into leaving, the author with his sweet soft voice and his endless sentences wrapping around me like a hug, telling me the real color of my real hair and making me so intrigued that I left in search of the real.

Do you want the truth? I hate it. It was fun, in the library, in the circle, the nights as dark as the cubes once were, and me a little bandit on the run, a minor criminal stealing classes and Doritos from an institution of higher learning and its coddled alcoholic students. But now, whether I'm sleeping out or in, night is never dark. Orange-gray light surrounds everything, and the pain is realer than any joy could ever be.

Even the running gets monotonous. The name I give may change when some guy (always a guy) likes the curve of the thumb I'm holding out as I walk down the shoulder of some state highway, shooting pains in my ankles and my feet from these used-thrift-store shit shoes. The name I give the guy may change, but the guy doesn't change, not really. The road doesn't change. The endless hustle to eat and drink and keep running doesn't change. Maybe the guy buys me a Dr. Pepper at the gas station and maybe he doesn't, but if he does, he expects something in return, expects a dollar twenty-nine worth of gratitude, expects me to see him as my protector.

I'm a dumbshit, but I do know this: No one wants to save you for the pure, unadulterated joy of salvation. They want you to owe them. Just like he did. He gave me the experienced world and took the real. And the would-be heroes of today, from the Kenyon College library to the southbound shoulder of US 36, will get as good as they give, too.

And but so. A purple semi-truck cab with no load pulls over for me. I'd never been in a semi before, and as I walked up to the cab, it took me a second to figure out how to even open the door, and then seconds more staring up at this tiny guy with a belly. He looks like a ball of dough with four sticks stuck in it, and the passenger side of the cab, at my eye level, is littered with a dozen empty Diet Mountain Dew cans, so many that the cab smells citrus-sweet, and finally the guy says, "There's a step."

I look down and so there is. I climb up, hands gripping the leather seat, and then pull myself in and close the door.

"Where ya headed?" he asks. One of his front teeth has a little brown spot.

"South," I say.

"How far South?" he asks.

"Dunno yet," I tell him.

"Fair enough. I'll take ya a bit." He shifts the truck into first and starts driving. He doesn't say anything for a long time, and I stare out the huge windows, so high up that I don't feel like I'm in a car so much as I feel like I am flying at a very low altitude. I look out the window and revel in the only memory I have to remember: sitting in a passenger seat somewhere with a blue sky, looking up and thinking about the immensity of it all, the planetness of the planet, sitting next to someone who probably loved me.

And finally he asks, "Don't want to be impolite but how'd you get the scar?"

I look over at him. "Huh?" I ask. He doesn't say anything for a minute, and he's just looking at the road. Then he turns to me and puts a finger around the front of his ear, circling his tragus. I touch my own ear there and feel the rise of a scar there.

"Sorry if it's rude to ask. Just looks like, well, my wife, she got a face lift. I didn't tell her to or nothing. But she got one, and she's got that same scar, and I was just thinking that you're about the youngest girl ever to get a face lift if you got one." I don't say anything, and I can tell he feels awkward, so he keeps talking as I feel the scar. "Nothing wrong with it, of course. Not trying to say there's nothing wrong with it. You're just awfully young, you know."

"They cut around the ear?"

"Yeah, well, they did for her anyway. My wife—she's as crazy as she is beautiful—for a while she had her cheeks changed so her cheeks looked all Angelica Houston, but then I convinced her to get that taken out. I'm always tellin' her that people our age oughtta look old."

I reach up and flip down the passenger-side visor, but there's no mirror. So I lean over toward the window and look at myself in the side view. I stare hard, trying to recognize or not recognize the girl I see. "Where do they cut you for that? For the cheek thing?"

"Inside your mouth. Right where your upper lip meets your mouth. It's pretty nasty, actually. I mean, you can't hardly ever see it, but when you do."

I don't hear the end of the sentence. I flip up my lip, and there's the thin white line amid the pink at the top of my mouth. I want to throw up. My hair is brown. My eyes are hazel. But my face is not my face.

I look at myself in the sideview mirror a while longer, trying not to cry. But I start anyway, and then I can't stop.

I don't know who, if anyone, I'm looking for. And even if I did, I don't look like the person they're missing.

"There, there," he says, reaching his hand over toward me, touching my knee. I throw his hand away. I don't need a goddamned savior. I need a face. I need my face.

Or maybe I just need to forget that I had a face.

I know he's reading, or at least that 178 is, because I got the email he sent to all of us: "It will be easier if you come now," he said. Easier.

Easier?

Are you saying I'll die faster, 178? Or are you saying he'll erase this and I can go back home to the cubes?

I was staying at a shelter for women and children I don't know which I was but anyway I was one or the other I had a room of my own and a door that locked (although others had the key) had a desk and a notebook into which I could write I got two hours on the computer each day a little more if I insisted that I was finishing something I was supposed to use my computer time to look for jobs and "learn new skills" but mostly I just typed up what I'd rewritten and then tried to find ways for others to read it Build the inaccessible circle within the accessible whole

It was five thirty in the morning My room had a window as tall as my forearm and twice as wide There was a baby blue curtain improvised from a thin blanket that had been donated by some charitable soul but the curtain didn't keep the light out so much as it stained the light washing everything in the palest blue It was dark outside or as dark as it got but there was always a streetlight shining just feet from the room and so it was always blue in there and I could never quite sleep—not like I had in the Cubes anyway

I lay there pretending to be asleep as one does when one hopes to fall asleep I was thinking about how weird it is that in order to actually sleep you have to pretend that you are already asleep You don't get rich by acting rich You don't grow breasts by wearing a bra But you act as if you're sleeping to fall asleep

Earlier I had Group and this girl named Tasha was talking about how she wanted her ex How she felt this ceaseless urge to call him that never went away and how she could never get this idea out of her head even for a second that the only coherent thought she could have would be CALL HIM She was saying she couldn't even watch a sitcom or play with her kid (four bushy-haired adorable) She was saying how she couldn't pay attention to anything and it occurred to me that in order to do something anything attention must be paid And here was this thought consuming her attention like flames suck the oxygen all around them Call him call him call him call him call him call him the ceaseless prayer's evil twin

So someone said "This is a man who put cigarettes out on your eyelids"

And Tasha started crying and she said "I know I know" And then after a few seconds she said "I just wanna call him. I don't wanna see him."

Attention must be paid see Of course it was crazy It was as crazy as the tweaker who smiles in the mirror and sees her skin sunk as if it has melted from her face sees the brown nubbins that used to be her teeth and who as she cries thinks to herself that there can only be one solution to the horrific tragedy that has befallen her which is of course to smoke some meth It was as crazy as my week-old but ceaseless wish to be returned to the Cubes to exonerate my way through however many heartbeats I might have remaining in my allotment I was the only person in that room who'd never been abused by those I trusted (at least not without my explicit permission) but I knew Tasha's pain In my resurrection I have known only the kind of people who seek to fix problems with their causes Maybe there is no other kind of person in the end

And so the woman who's leading the group an overweight Latina who wore a too-small pants suit and at least to our naked eyes did not seem any better off than the rest of us said "You called him yet?"

And Tasha said "No" And then after a second the compulsion compelled her to add "Not yet"

And our leader said "That ain't nothin' We ain't fighting for a victory Tasha baby We fightin' for a tie"

And then someone else brought forth one of the clichés of our little gathering a line I'd heard before but never quite understood "You fake it till you make it, Tasha Fake it till you make it"

And so it was with my sleep last night.

I have exactly forty-two minutes to write this and not one second more. It's been an eventful week, one of those weeks so eventful that you don't have time to take notes as it's happening, and so the truth gets folded up by memory, and memory lies and simplifies whenever necessary to make sure that the story fits perfectly into whatever package the brain has waiting for it. And so the impermanence and imperfection of memory has to be multiplied with the forty-two minutes (now just forty-one) available to me, which is to say: Forgive my typos. They will be legion.

So first off, I told someone. I mean, a real someone. After Group, this girl asked me if I wanted to smoke a cigarette—people are always asking me if I want to smoke cigarettes—and I said no, but I'll get some fresh air with you. Of course the air wasn't fresh—the tiny courtyard was surrounded by buildings on all four sides, so done to protect us from our tormentors, and the only courtyard activity was smoking. So I went out there—this girl's name is Dawn, and she was new to the shelter, one of those cute girls with a list of diagnoses so long that one cannot say she has an “underlying problem,” because all her problems lie both under and over her: She was a belimic learning disabled alcoholic cutter in a physically abusive relationship with a ghuy who was apparently one of the best World of Warcraft players in the world, a fact that Dawn—at least when she talked about the guy in Group—seemed to find really genuinely exciting

(I, of course, think of those addicted to MMORPGs as nothing but second-rate exoperators working with inferior technology.)

Andbutso Dawn asks me if I play WoW at all. And I say no. And she asks if I play something else. And I say sorta. And she asks me what.

There's a square of sky available to you in the courtyard. A perfect square, and a large one. You can't see out to the horizon or anything, but there's a nice large square of sky up there, and because the buildings cut off the view equally in each direction, it doesn't look exactly like sky. (35 minutes.) Instead, it looks like a framed picture, and the sky is so cloudlessly monochromatically blue that you can start to believe after a while that it actuaally is a painting, which is exactly what I was believing when this bird flies overhead, slicing through the canvas in a way that seems utterly impossible. And in that moment, I decide to tell her

I played this game called experating, I say, this massively intense multisensory role playing game in which information culled from the Internet about conversations and experiences is triangulated from multiple sources to create hyper realistic scenarios that a viewer can then almost experience, which was called experation. The experations were created to be so emotionally and physically involving that you would feelreallyfeel them, which would make it not-at-all-inconvenient that your brain was being used in conjunction with many other brains as a kind of huge parallel processing server to make computer systems learn more and more quickly (31.) Our cognitive prosesses aid in AI, basically.

Whereupon Dawn says, BAD. ASS!

And I say, Well the downside is that experating only works if you do not know that you're you—and also all the brainpower it takes to maintain a sense of identity was needed for the processing to work, so I have no idea who I am and also I think they did some shit to my face because like look at this scar and this one do you see that? I show her my ear and my hairline and she's like, Bad Ass. And I say, I guess

I think in the first blush of me saying it she really did believe me, but then the more she thought about it the less she believed me and that night just before the 10 PM lights out she knocks on my door and I say, come in. I'm sitting at the desk, hunched over, trying to write what I've just told you and she does and says hi and sits down on the edge of my little twin bed. I'm worried about you, she says. And then she tells me why she's worried im the language of the shelter. She's worried that I'm in denial, that I'm failing to surrender, that I'm holding onto my old life and its bad habits. She knows that reality bites, but haven't we lived with our delusions long enough? Isn't it time to tell the truth not only to each other but to ourselves?

And then she says that her boyfriend, sometimes he really believes it. Believes that WoW is real, or at least argues that it's not any less real than the world, but that the delusions makes him beat her in the end. I want to tell her that the delusion isn't beating her; he is, and that anyway I am not deluded. Which I am not. I know now more then ever that I am not deluded.

But in the end I don't try to convince her, because I know that the world cannot be convinced of my experiences or my experations without the kind of evidence I can't provide and don't ever want to be able to provide. (4 minutes; damn it why can't I learn how to type more quickly?) The only people who need to know the truth about who I am are the people who know the truth about who I was. And so I tell her that it's hard to be honest, that I have lived a long time with lying (which, as lies go, isn't the most untrue one ever told), and that I'm sorry. I thank her for talking to me, recommit myself to the truth, - and by the truth I mean the lies—the 91,363 lies I have told because they all strike people as truer than the truth.

Everyone seems to think we missed something that she failed to update

But she didn't miss anything You missed something

You failed to make the update possible

She is still waiting

For you

Well, That Was a Mistake

Here's what happened: I started to think about what success would mean. Say I got out off the shelter carousel. Say I got a job working, I don't know, at Fed Ex. I'm smart enough and reasonably punctual, so I'd work my way up. In fifteen years, I'd be making good money. Maybe I'd have a husband. Maybe even a child. I could have a house. Probably not a great house, but a house. The extraordinary successes—supreme court justice, hedge fund manager, tennis pro—would never be available to me. But they're never available to most people.

And but so something about the thought of success—the work I'd have to do to get to the dead middle of Americanness—kind of crushed me. And the shelter got depressing, and I didn't have any friends, and I couldn't sleep, and it all seemed kinda pointless, since my face is not my face and anyone missing me wouldn't ever know that they're missing me.

So I emailed 178, and I told him I wanted to come home. The reply came within a minute:

14, I can come to you. Where are you.

- 178

I wrote back:

178 - I can be at the Wal-Mart on W. Parker Road whenever.

And he replied a minute later:

Can you be there in ten minutes?

So 178 had been close, I guess. He had been close or else they've invented some method of speedy transport. I left the shelter and walked to the Wal-Mart, and I saw him standing there from a block away, standing beneath the Pharmacy sign on the sidewalk outside, scanning the people walking and driving past. 178 looked paler than when I'd last seen him in a parking lot, his cheeks sunken. As I got closer, he saw me, and his pianist fingers balled into tight fists. I couldn't tell if he was excited or scared.

In retrospect, probably both.

I walked up to him. We shook hands, and then a black Lincoln Towncar drove up and stopped quick in front of us. 178 opened the door and held it for me.

"You're not coming?"

"I'm going back to the cubes," he said quietly, looking down.

"I'm not?"

The slighthness with which he shook his head no should have signaled me to what was coming, but I was too tired and too sad to fight anymore. I got in the car. 178 closed the door for me. It was dark as hell in there with the tinted windows and the all-black leather interior, but the thing that struck me first was how much legroom I had. I could like kick my legs up and still not hit the front seat.

He didn't turn around, but I could tell from the close-cropped gray hair and the megaperfect posture that he was driving.

"14," he said.

"Hi," I answered.

"14, you were so promising." He was driving now. He didn't say anything else for a while, and I still wasn't scared. The car was too nice to be scared. I felt so dirty in it. I kept looking at my fingernails, and worrying that they were kind of jagged. Too jagged for this car, anyway. We were out on some highway when he started talking again.

"Did you ever wonder why you were able just to walk out, unnoticed? How you were able just to get free?"

"Yes," I said.

"It was impossible," he said. "That's why. It was impossible for it to occur to you that there was an outside. Something is wrong with your brain, 14. We are concerned about you. You're a very special specimen, and we don't want to see you suffering like this."

"Can I just go back to the Cubes?"

"Not yet, no. Because what if your brain malfunctioned again, and suddenly told you that you wanted something you didn't want. Do you remember the story of the blind woman and the sign?"

"No," I said. I could see his forehead when I looked at the rear view mirror but nothing else. I was waiting for him to glance back at me, but he never did.

"There are certain kinds of blindness that are caused not by your eyes but by your brain. Something in your brain misfires and even though the images come in through your eyes, you can't process having seen them. These people, naturally, make fantastic subjects for neuroscience studies. So a few years ago, a brain-blind woman was being interviewed by a neuroscientist in his office. And after a few minutes of talking, the neuroscientist quietly held up a sign, which read LEAVE THE ROOM NOW.

"The blind woman immediately stood up and began to feel her way toward the door.

"But that's not the interesting part, 14. The interesting part is this: The neuroscientist asked why she was leaving. And the woman didn't say, 'I just feel like I should leave' or anything. She just said, 'I just need to go to the bathroom.' Such is the nature of the brain, 14. It is mechanized in ways that we are blind to. In ways, I suppose, that even I was blind to."

We drive in silence for several minutes, and all the while I am thinking of how to phrase the thing I want to say in a way that he will find convincing. "If you let me go back, I won't leave again."

"Ay, but there's the rub, 14. You won't leave—unless your brain tells you to. We've gotta train. That. Brain. Say it with me, 14. Train that brain. Train that brain. Train that brain."

He keeps saying it, and soon enough, I am saying it, too.

He drove me to this airport hangar looking thing. I don't know what it was. A barn or an airport hangar or something—one of those big corrugated rectangles that provide do nothing except hide whatever's inside.

What was inside? A bare medical table with a pillow. He walked me to it. There were two other guys in there, but I didn't recognize them. They kind of hung out in the shadows while he walked me to it, and when I started to slow down, he took me by the arm. Not cruelly, exactly. Maybe that's the way your father takes you by the arm when he needs you to go somewhere. I don't know. Or at least I don't remember knowing.

He took me to the table and I got on it. I didn't fight, really. The guys came up then and they used these leather straps to hold me down to the table. The table itself was quite cold—the building had no insulation, and I was only wearing jeans and a tshirt, and I could feel the cold of the table against the small of my back where my tshirt had run up.

He put a wooden bit in my mouth. "This shouldn't be necessary," he said.

It was necessary.

They lifted my head a little and I felt this belt tightening around my temples. Then I started to fight. I spit out the piece of wood once, and then he said, "You're going to want to keep that in, believe me," and he shoved it back in and I let it stay there.

"This won't hurt," he said.

It hurt.

At one point—I don't know if it had been hours or days—he told me, "The brain has no nerves, 14. There's no such thing as brain pain. They perform brain operations quite often on patients who are entirely conscious. It might be helpful to remember that." And then the pain came again, not in my brain but in my face and eyes and ribs and toes, the searing pain of my head on fire, as images flashed in my vision. I could not tell if the images were real or implanted, but I saw the novelist and islands and the shelters and the library at the college and the pick-up truck where the men had held me down with one hand each.

Over and over again, I lost control of my body, soiling myself while screaming for help, snot running down into my mouth, which was held open by the bit that kept me from gnawing off my own tongue, and for days I tasted nothing but my snot and I could not move so that even when the machine wasn't working, I was intensely uncomfortable.

And I would beg him.

And he would not answer, or else he would say, "It can't hurt, 14. It just can't. This is how we will restore you. This is how we stored you, and this is how we will restore you."

And in hearing that, I wondered: Had I been through this before? Could anything this terrible be forgotten? And if I forgot it, would that unmake its happening?

It happened five or six times a day, for I don't know how long, every day. In the morning the men would unstrap me and carry me to a hose along one of the corrugated walls. They let me shower and then change—gray pajama-like things, the same stuff we wore in the cubes—and then took me back to the table. I never fought. I don't know why. I was so tired, I guess. So scared. And also I am just not a courageous person.

When he forced me to update TiNT and I tried to hide the message for you, I still felt like fighting. But that was only two days in. Toward the end, I felt as if I was only barely still me. The pain was indescribable and I felt like it would last forever. On the last day, he complained that I was progressing slowly. I had the bit in, so I couldn't say anything, but that scared the shit out of me. Did he mean more time? I'd been there a week at least—some of the days had melted in my brain—and already I felt like I was losing myself. I felt like the list of things I knew I knew—I like the novelist; I have brown hair; I like circles—was shrinking. And I would have given anything to end the pain. I would have given up you or myself or anything.

And then in between sessions on what was at least the eighth day, I was staring at the ceiling trying not to piss myself when one of the corrugated walls ripped open and a dozen well-armed individuals ran in. They were shouting, and the last thing I clearly remember was the irony of these people shouting, "14, you are safe you are safe you are safe now," in between bursts of automatic gunfire.



We were driving through endless Plains—the plain plain plains, beautiful in the way abandonment is. Two-car caravan, both bluesilver SUVs, the lead car shimmery ahead of us, the road empty. Daytime. The woman, Margaret, was driving, still wearing the all-black ensemble of my rescue that morning. I was riding shotgun, watching the landscape scroll by between long blinks. Charlie was in the back seat, asleep thanks to some pill he took for the pain of his broken rib.

I had no idea how long we'd been driving, because I'd fallen asleep with my face against the smooth, oversize window of the SUV the moment I'd gotten into the car, the kind of sleeping position that would've made me sore if I weren't so sore everywhere else from the shocks and the steel bed and the restraints. I wanted to sleep for a long time now that I had armed guards; I felt safe for the first time since the circle at the Kenyon College library.

So I let my eyes open and close and tried to feel safe, tried not to think about the guys who'd strapped me down to that table again and again and again, and him, his calm voice telling me that what he was doing to me wasn't hurting.

"Are you up enough to talk?"

"Yeah," I said, then sat up and looked over at her. Her hands were wrapped so tight around the steering wheel at 2 and 10 that her nails dug into her palms.

"You probably have some questions."

"I'm really tired," I answered. I did have questions, but I felt almost anesthetically exhausted.

"Who are we, for starters. We are just you who've been out longer. Well, except Charlie. He let Charlie out to get you, but he couldn't do it. Got his hand on your wrist and saw something in your eye or in the stubble on your hair in that parking lot and he couldn't do it. We found him in that same parking lot two weeks later going absolutely crazy, scraping at his head trying to get what he thought was a transmitter out, all this blood everywhere. He was just sitting next to this dumpster behind the Wal-Mart bleeding out of the back of his head because he was banging it against the wall of the dumpster trying to get to the transmitter, which felt so real he could feel it. Except of course there wasn't a transmitter. There was just him and his ineluctable instructions. Anyway, there are five of us, out of the 230 who are believed to be in the cubes experating. Just five. Well, six, counting you. We didn't know if there'd be anything left of you to rescue in all that time you were gone. We thought you'd come out cube-ready."

"I don't really understand what's going on."

"Yeah, we're gonna have to do some cognitive tests and see where he zapped you and how well, but it seems like you're here. Your brain seems more yours than his, at least. Do you feel that way?"

"I'm confused," I said. **The desire to sleep bordered on the narcoleptic.** I knew I should listen, but I also found it all endlessly confusing, like each word made sense but the overarching sentence did not, like my brain lacked the staying power to get through a long sentence with a memory for how it had began.

"He was named Philip. We don't know his last name. Unmarried. Parents deceased. While everyone else in AI was trying to get computers to act like humans, Philip realized it'd be easier to get the human brain to function as a massively parallel processing center, right? You'd just need to distract the hell out of them. Enter experation, which was his great insight. People had known about electroshock therapy for decades, known that if you overdid it, patients could lose memory. You probably don't remember this, but all the subjects in the cubes are shocked weekly, so their memories are scattered and discombobulated and in the long run—and we were all there for the long run—the long-term memory is completely lost."

"That's why no one will run from the cubes?"

"There's no locked door," she said. "He wasn't even there most days, as far as we can tell. Anyone could just walk out at any moment, which we figure was his defense should his work ever be discovered: They could leave whenever they want. But no one did, except us."

"It's the infinite jest," Margaret said quietly. "Experating is so engaging that you don't get thirsty or hungry. Do you remember?"

"Yes."

"Remember how you could just ride the groove?"

"Feelingreallyfeeling," I said.

"Nothing felt that good," she said.

"Nothing that easy felt that good," I admitted.

"So that's what will happen. They'll die of dehydration down there, or if they run out of food first, then they'll starve. The feelings of hunger or thirst won't drive them to escape; it will just push them toward more experating, a feeling infinitely available to them. 230 souls, dead in the onyx cubes beneath some field somewhere in we think Kansas. How much do you remember of leaving?"

"I was running it was flat I went for a few hours and then I found the motel."

"It wasn't called the Starlite Motel, was it?" she asked.

"No. No, I was trying to make an inaccessible circle within his circle of accessibility. I knew he could search the Internet faster and more effectively than anyone. I knew that. I remember knowing that."

"Because you'd been one of the processors he used."

"Right, I guess so," I said. "I only remember... what did you call it?"

"Experating?"

"Yeah. You called it what God I'm so tired I don't even feel here."

"The way electroshock works, unfortunately, you might feel less here tomorrow than you feel today."

"Great," I said. And then I remembered what she'd said. "The infinite jest," I said.

"Yes," she said. I looked over at her and she was close-lipped smiling just a little bit, and I said, "I used to experate with this author."

And she said, "I know. We all did." And then the fatigue wormed its way finally through my skull and enveloped my brain in sleep, the poor man's experation, and I dreamt of the scratchy-faced puppy-eyed genius who had saved and/or tempted me into my now.

- You say that I am.
- I'd say that I am a person, like you, only perhaps not as miserably well-educated.
- It is.
- I'm going to post again.
- Because I haven't updated them in forever. They were all meless, not that they cared all that much, but the weird thing is how I become meless without them.
- I miss them. And it's in my rights. Read the PBOR.
- Almost as if I couldn't exist without them, yes. But then again, isn't your existence predicated on the existence of others? Aren't you defined in cooperation with and in opposition to the people with whom you interact? Are you not also made smarter and more interesting and more real by the always-gathering collection of interactions that make you?
- Right, so you say. But when I walked out of the cubes, I was less a person than I am now. You'd acknowledge that.
- Okay, then. Can I continue?

- She said, "I know." I was unable to circumscribe my thoughts—like my brain waves were splashing over the fishtank of my skull—but over the next few days I eventually gathered the truth: There were thousands of us in the Cubes—more than I had ever imagined by orders of magnitude, because each of us only ever saw one building in the sprawling underground complex. Of those uncounted thousands, just eight of us had ever walked out the unlocked door.

And what the eight of us shared was exparating with DFW, whom Margaret and the others theorized was some kind of wrench in the works, a persistent if rare bug in the programming who informed us of our usness. We had all liked exparating either his stories or his personal journeys or his interviews. I'd walked the beach with him when he said I had brown hair; Margaret had been making out with Pemulis at a Boston-area tennis academy when Pemulis had whispered off-script Unhook and walk out the door now. All of them, with the exception of 178—who'd been sent for me—had known Wallace or his works through experation.

- Right, I posited that to Margaret. Might it not be that all exparators worked with Wallace, that the level of detail in his work made him a prime candidate for full-fleshed, infinitely distracting exparational entertainment? Which I guess they had all wondered about until they brought 178 into the fold, the only one of us who'd been sent out rather than choosing to leave. He'd never exparated with Wallace, and indeed had never even heard of him—which while obviously not necessarily lock solid evidence was about as lock solid as one can get when one is not irrefutably human and running awaytoward a sick experiment in naturalizing artificial entertainment and artificializing natural intelligence.
- Yeah, well. So the obvious thing was to ask DFW about all this, to ask him howwhy he seemed to be so intimately involved in saving those few of us who'd been saved, and if he perhaps knew anything in re. the location of the Cubes, but DFW is tragically no longer with us.
- Correct. So we drove toward the great flat expanse of the middle of the country, toward the Starlite and the Wal-Mart that had been within walking distance. We were both close and not, and spent a lot of the next two days driving in broad circles looking for something that might look like something, waiting for our stunted memories to trigger.

I really did feel the timebomb ticking. Still do, in fact. You say that when I walked out of the Cubes, I was not fundamentally equal to other human beings, that my death on that day would have been different and less than my death on this day, right?

- Well, to me, they are real. I think about them hairless in their apparatuses, skin translucent pale, and the only man who'd ever been able to tell them when they were hungry or thirsty is rotting in the corrugated steel barn. They are just exparating, entirely oblivious to the filthy waste accumulating beneath them, unaware of the darkening urine they are producing, their legs and arms cramping in ways that will almost but not quite draw them out of the experation, the spit in their mouths thickening into a gel, their lips cracking, their eyes sliding into their brains like sinkholes, the kidneys shutting down in an unfixable way. If these are not the problems of humans, what are?
- But let me ask you a question: Have you ever been sitting in a movie theater with your 64-ounce Diet Coke mostly empty in the cupholder beside you, the climactic battle scene approaching, and felt the need to pee? Have you ever held it even though it was very uncomfortable to do so because you want to enjoy this exciting but entirely fictional moment? Have you not chosen fiction over your body?
- Well, it's better than any movie, I promise you that. Orders of magnitude better. So maybe you should just shut the hell up. They are people!
- Because I want out of here. Because it is happening now. Right now, people who are like me, who but for the grace of arbitrary companion selection would be me, are shaking in their restraints, their thickening blood poisoning them to death while they feel themselves to be eating and drinking and talking and being. They have clean, fresh water an arms length away and they will never drink it unless we get them unhooked, and there are thousands of them, sir, and this is happening now while we talk around the thing that is happening. They are dying because He was killed to save me, you see. Charlie and Margaret and everyone saved me, killing Him, and now that saving me will cost thousands of lives, and their blood—their real blood which when pricked they bleed—will be on my hands and... just let me out of here! OUT! OUT!
- Sorry. Okay. I need some fresh air.
- Yeah, I'm not an idiot. I know you're not gonna let me outside without you. So come with.
- Can I bum one?
- No, but I've been thinking about starting.
- God, the elevator here is so slow. You'd think fast elevators would be, like, vital to the enterprise.
- Right.
- Is it cold out?
- I don't even know. Yesterday, I guess, they let me walk around the courtyard for a while. But I haven't been out here.
- Wait. Wait.

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I remember this. I remember here.

3.2.1

- ⑥ I don't want to discuss it.
- ⑥ You said I could tell them everything I tell you as long as I don't reveal my location, right? So, yeah. I was just recounting things that were said in the order they were said.
- ⑥ Because I don't want to contextualize it.
- ⑥ Oh, no, I'd never want them to find me. Why would I want to leave here? I mean, the food sucks. The people suck. The quality of ping-pong competition sucks. And the meds suck. You yourself would agree that I have almost no chance of getting out of here in the foreseeable future on my own.
- ⑥ Well, your definition of progress and my definition of progress don't line up very well.
- ⑥ You define progress as me quote abandoning my quote delusions, right? You think that in order for me to progress, I must accept that the people in the cubes are not real people.
- ⑥ Okay, if the cubes do not exist, though, the people who do not exist inside the cubes which do not exist are not real people, correct?
- ⑥ Right so you want me to abandon the experators. You want me to acknowledge that my experience of experation was itself a fiction, right? That all my late experiences have been in some essential way constructed, yes? That everything before you was less real than you are.
- ⑥ You want me to acknowledge, basically, that I never experated, that I never agreed to relinquish my identity to Him, that He in fact never really existed, that I have disassociated with some past self for the purpose of nonconfrontation with some trauma.
- ⑥ That, in fact, all the times I remember experating are experations of experating, delusions of delusions.
- ⑥ Right. Well that is not my definition of progress. My definition of progress would be someone getting me the hell out of here so I can get closer to the people who are dying in cubes beneath some god-forsaken corn field.
- ⑥ Are these scars not real?
- ⑥ Sure, but there are a lot of explanations for everything. Here's what you can't explain: No one is coming for me.
- ⑥ No! I told you a thousand times.
- ⑥ Because my face isn't my face anyway, and so anyone can come here and say that I am theirs.
- ⑥ Sure, eventually, but before the tests come back, some poor broken mother who has been waiting for lo these many years for her kidnapped slash runaway daughter to return will come here, tears pouring down her face, convinced that God has brought her daughter back to her. Publishing my face accomplishes nothing except to devastate the people who desperately want me to be theirs. And it used to could be that you could just pretend that you were theirs. You could just go home with them and be part of this new family and live happily ever after except for the occasionally nagging awareness that You are not You (which, I mean, is a problem faced on some level by everyone, I would argue) but now with genetics and all everything is provable, which just makes it totally impossible to construct a worthwhile reality unless you somehow happen to have one of those rare realities that requires no construction. Like, for instance, do you not have my DNA?
- ⑥ And what says it?
- ⑥ So there you go. You can't prove I'm a liar and I can't prove I'm not. Maybe you should let me go.
- ⑥ Then I guess I'll have to count on getting busted out, huh?
- ⑥ Whaddya say instead I tell ya a story?
- ⑥ The week you bring me in here, we're scouring the fields. Charlie had some kind of handheld device, like a fishfinder thing almost, and we're literally walking through these fields where we believe the Cubes to be. But everyone's memory is fried and inconsistent, and we walked out of there less able to form memories than we later became. Or you would say that our memories were inconsistent because they were not based on memory but delusion, right?
- ⑥ Well, one day they will dig the dead out of those onyx cubes, and I hope you are alive to see it. So we're walking in these diagonal lines; I don't really have the spatial intelligence to understand how this works, but basically we were crisscrossing this field, the corn head-high, nothing but corn in front of me and behind me and to my left and my right. You start to feel like corn out there after a while, no one talking, everyone listening for some evidence of the cubes, kicking the cracked gray dirt for a trapdoor. And then after this forever of silence, Charlie said, "Do you think we could ask him?"
- And I said, "Who?"
- And Charlie said, "You know, DFW."
- And I said, "Ask him? He's dead, Charlie."
- "I know," Charlie said. "But the DFW who was in our experations was not the historical DFW, right? He was a constructed DFW, built from memory and photographs and the historical record. We could reconstruct him."
- "But without the equipment, you could never get hooked in, couldn't feelreallyfeel."
- "Right, but who's to say that he had a monopoly on the equipment. You know," Charlie said, "Columbus did not discover America. Columbus re-discovered America."
- ⑥ Yeah, no, that's the end.
- ⑥ Well I'm sorry you didn't like it. I think it's a good story.
- ⑥ No, it doesn't have a double meaning, doctor. It has one meaning twice.